

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology

Psychology, Department of

---

2017

# Youthful Familicidal Offenders: Targeted Victims, Planned Attacks

Rosa Viñas-Racionero

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [r.v.racionero@gmail.com](mailto:r.v.racionero@gmail.com)

Louis B. Schlesinger

*John Jay College of Criminal Justice*, [lschlesinger@jjay.cuny.edu](mailto:lschlesinger@jjay.cuny.edu)

Mario Scalora

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [mscalora1@unl.edu](mailto:mscalora1@unl.edu)

John P. Jarvis

*Federal Bureau of Investigation*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/psychfacpub>



Part of the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#), and the [Psychology Commons](#)

---

Viñas-Racionero, Rosa; Schlesinger, Louis B.; Scalora, Mario; and Jarvis, John P., "Youthful Familicidal Offenders: Targeted Victims, Planned Attacks" (2017). *Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology*. 814.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/psychfacpub/814>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Psychology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# Youthful Familicidal Offenders: Targeted Victims, Planned Attacks

Rosa Viñas-Racionero<sup>1</sup>  · Louis B. Schlesinger<sup>2</sup> · Mario J. Scalora<sup>1</sup> · John P. Jarvis<sup>3</sup>

Published online: 14 July 2016

© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2016

This document is a U.S. government work and is not subject to copyright in the United States.

**Abstract** A nonrandom national sample of 16 familicides, which involved 19 offenders (ages 14 to 21 years) who either killed or made a serious attempt to kill their families, was studied. The majority of offenders were Caucasian (78.91 %) males (84.21 %) with interpersonal family conflicts due to parental control, substance use, or physical violence. Prior to the murders, 50 % of the offenders reported to others their intent to kill their families. All of the 42 reported victims were specifically targeted and most of the homicides were planned shooting attacks (75 %) rather than spontaneous eruptions. Immediately following the homicides, 75 % of the offenders stole money from their families, and in 50 % of the cases they either called their friends to report the murders or to plan leisure activities. All offenders were immediate suspects and 81.25 % confessed to the homicides. Implications for furthering our understanding of this group of young offenders are offered.

**Keywords** Offenders · Youth · Mass murder · Family violence

Familicide is loosely defined as the killing of multiple family members at the same time and in the same location (Dietz 1986; Holmes and Holmes 1992; Malmquist 1980; Wilson

et al. 1995). While familicide has received considerable media attention (Sisask et al. 2012), empirical research on this topic is scarce. One major difficulty for research is the inconsistency in its operational definition: some studies define familicide as the killing of the whole family (Dietz 1986; Malmquist 1980), while others only require the killing of at least two members of the family (Liem et al. 2013; Liem and Reichelmann 2014). A second, related difficulty is that younger offenders' populations have received limited attention. Liem and Reichelmann (2014) found that familicidal offenders could be divided into two groups: those who killed their spouses and children, and those who killed their parents and siblings. The research on familicide has focused primarily on middle-aged offenders, who mostly killed their spouses and children (Anderson et al. 2011; Dietz 1986; Léveillé et al. 2009, 2010; Liem et al. 2013; Scheinin et al. 2011; Schlesinger 2000; Stone 1993; Thaller 2012; Websdale 2010; Wilson et al. 1995). Only a few case studies have centered on youthful offenders who mainly killed their parents and siblings (Ewing 1997; Heide and McCurdy 2010; Heide 2013; Malmquist 1980; Meloy et al. 2001). In addition, research with youthful samples has often relied on limited information or secondary sources such as media reports or case studies based solely on self-report (Ewing 1997; Fegadel and Heide 2015; Shon and Roberts 2010; Malmquist 1980). The present study aims to overcome prior research limitations by utilizing a national sample of 19 youth familicidal offenders who killed or attempted to kill their whole family.

There are no national crime statistics on the prevalence of familicide (Duwe 2004), due in part to the low rates of intra-family homicides involving two or more victims (e.g., according to the National Violent Death Reporting System there were approximately 29 homicides of this type per year between 2003 and 2013). Moreover, youthful offenders are considered to be even less common than their

✉ Rosa Viñas-Racionero  
r.v.racionero@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1028 H St., Apt. 307, Lincoln, NE 68508, USA

<sup>2</sup> Department of Psychology, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York, NY 10019, USA

<sup>3</sup> Behavioral Research and Instruction Unit, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, DC, United States

older counterparts (Liem et al. 2013; Liem and Reichelmann 2014). The limited research that has been conducted on youthful offenders found most to be males, 14 to 21 years old, who were living with their families at the time of the murders (Ewing 1997; Heide and McCurdy 2010; Shon and Roberts 2010; Malmquist 1980; Meloy et al. 2001). These offenders typically targeted their parents and siblings (Ewing 1997; Heide and McCurdy 2010; Shon and Roberts 2010), and killed only their parents if no siblings were in the family home at the time (Anthony 2014; Heide 2013; Mulvey et al. 2006). And, more rarely, in the case of female familicidal offenders, most were in their 20s, and their spouses or children or both were targeted (Messing and Heeren 2004; Scott and Fleming 2014).

A review of case studies of young familicide offenders indicates that the trigger was typically a long-term troubled relationship with their parents (Ewing 1997; Heide and McCurdy 2010; Shon and Roberts 2010; Liem and Reichelmann 2014; Malmquist 1980; Meloy et al. 2001; Mulvey et al. 2006), sometimes involving conflicts that grew out of divorce or custody disputes (Messing and Heeren 2004). Despite the presence of long-term family problems, these offenders were not typically described or considered to be physically violent by members of their family (Marleau et al. 2006), notwithstanding several case reports show that some of these individuals had committed violent crimes against non-family members (Ewing 1997; Heide 2013). In one case (Anthony 2014), the future victims feared their child and even tried to protect themselves by locking their bedroom doors at night and keeping guns with them for protection. In a few of the reported cases, psychotic and paranoid symptoms seemed to play a role in the murders (Ewing 1997; Heide and McCurdy 2010; Malmquist 1980; Marty 2010). Family conflicts and arguments generally stemmed from the offenders' poor performance at school or their jobs (Heide and McCurdy 2010), stealing from their families (Anthony 2014), suicidal ideation (Malmquist 1980; Marleau et al. 2006), or long-term substance abuse that had increased several days before the homicides (Heide 2013; Heide and McCurdy 2010). In two cases, offenders had run away from home in order to avoid arguments with their families (Heide and McCurdy 2010; Liem and Reichelmann 2014).

Approximately 25 % ( $n = 4$ ) of the youthful offenders reported recurring thoughts of killing their families prior to the murders (Marleau et al. 2006). Three case studies found that some offenders asked for help from their friends (Heide and McCurdy 2010) or family members (Meloy et al. 2001) in order to carry out the murders. Meloy et al. (2012) noted that in some cases pre-homicidal aggressive acts should be considered warning signs of imminent violence. While such aggressive behavior might seem unrelated to the future mass murder, such conduct indicates offenders' predisposition to escalate their behavior to more extreme forms of violence.

For instance, Heide and McCurdy (2010) reported the case of a 17-year-old offender who killed the owner of a store a few months before killing his family.

Familicides have not generally been impulsive acts, even though studies differ in the level of intent and planning attributed to the offenders. For instance, some studies suggest that youthful familicide offending is precipitated by the murder of one or both parents (Liem and Reichelmann 2014). In these cases, the familicides were triggered by an argument with one of the parents that escalated to include other family members (Shon and Roberts 2008, 2010). Other studies contend that youthful familicide offending is planned and focused at killing multiple victims and should be viewed as separate from traditional single-victim parricides (Marleau et al. 2006). Most familicidal victims have been attacked when they were resting (Mulvey et al. 2006), sleeping (Anthony 2014; Ewing 1997; Heide and McCurdy 2010), or entering their home (Anthony 2014; Meloy et al. 2001), while some familicides were impulsive reactions to escalated arguments.

Most of the young familicidal offenders killed their family members using weapons that they found at the crime scene. And they typically used only one killing implement such as a gun (Anthony 2014; Heide and McCurdy 2010; Malmquist 1980; Meloy et al. 2001), or more rarely a knife (Ewing 1997). In two reported cases, offenders used multiple killing methods such as stabbing and bludgeoning (Heide and McCurdy 2010).

Following the murders, youthful offenders engaged in a variety of activities such as calling their friends to explain the murders, involvement in social activities, stealing victims' money or credit cards, or just leaving the crime scene (Ewing 1997; Heide and McCurdy 2010; Malmquist 1980; Marty 2010). In two cases, in which major mental illness was found, the offenders left the scene and just wandered aimlessly until apprehended (Malmquist 1980; Marty 2010).

Crime scene staging – altering the crime scene to re-direct the investigation (Schlesinger et al. 2014) – occurred in three reported cases. Here, the offender changed, altered, or removed crime scene evidence (Mulvey et al. 2006), or provided a false report to law enforcement (verbal staging) in order to avoid becoming the main suspect (Ewing 1997; Heide 2013). In these three cases, offenders also engaged in more atypical behaviors such as dismemberment (Ewing 1997), moving the bodies from the crime scene (Liem and Reichelmann 2014), and necrophilia in one instance (Ewing 1997). Interestingly, none of the reported cases of youthful familicidal offenders involved an attempted or completed suicide as a postoffense behavior. This contrasts markedly with familicide cases in which the offenders were older, where 50–68.8 % of them committed suicide after the murders (Liem et al. 2013; Léveillé et al. 2009; Wilson et al. 1995).

The present study was undertaken because of the relatively limited research on youthful familicidal offenders. In addition,

this study aims at overcoming prior limitations regarding inconsistent operational definitions and scattered sources of data, which ranged from newspaper accounts to single case reports to law enforcement files. The specific study aims were: (1) to describe offenders' characteristics and their relationship with the victims, (2) to delineate victims' characteristics and their concerns about the offenders, (3) to detail offenders' behavior prior to the murders, (4) to examine the crime scene behaviors of both offenders and victims, and (5) to explore offenders' post-offense behavior and law enforcement investigation.

## Method

We used a non-random national sample of familicide cases, which occurred between 1984 and 2000. The cases in this sample were selected from a total of 946 homicide cases that were supplied by the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit through a collaborative project with John Jay College of Criminal Justice. The data for this research were taken from closed, fully adjudicated state and local cases that were contributed by law enforcement agencies from around the United States for the purpose of research. Most of the offenses occurred during the 1990s. Researchers had access to the entire case files which included law enforcement reports, crime scene photos, medical, psychiatric, psychological, and autopsy reports, statements of witnesses and offenders, and occasional statements of surviving victims as well. All identifiers, including names of victims, suspects, offenders, officers, departments, and correctional agencies, were removed. Only aggregate data were reported here. The Institutional Review Boards of both the FBI and John Jay College of Criminal Justice exempted the project because this research involved collection of data from existing documents.

Data collection was completed by the first author who was trained to code the research variables from the case files. To ensure the reliability of data collection, coding questions were documented and brought to the attention of the authors. Any disagreement was discussed and resolved between the first and the second author. Indicators of mental illness were evaluated based on corroborative information from psychological or psychiatric reports with no inference made by the coders.

A case met the inclusion criteria for the study if: (1) the offender was 21 years or younger and (2) the offender killed or attempted to kill all the members living in his or her family unit. All cases had at least two victims. Non-family members were not included in the sample, even though the researchers noted when they were targeted. (3) The murders or attempted murders occurred in one place and over the course of a day.

## Results

### Familicide Characteristics (16 Cases)

A case was classified as familicide if the offenders murdered, or made a serious attempt to murder (i.e., the offenders attacked the victims but failed to kill them), their entire family who was present at the time (Dietz 1986; Holmes and Holmes 1992; Malmquist 1980). A total of 16 cases of youthful (21 years or younger) familicide offenders met the inclusion criteria for this study. The majority of the 16 cases (75 %) were completed familicides ( $n = 12$ ), and 25 % were attempted familicides ( $n = 4$ ).

Seventy-five percent of the familicides involved single-offenders ( $n = 12$ ), and 25 % were multiple-offender cases ( $n = 4$ ), which included: two siblings ( $n = 2$ ), two siblings who were assisted by three friends ( $n = 1$ ), and one offender who was assisted by one friend ( $n = 1$ ). Those offenders who did not have a family relationship with the victims, and assisted in the homicides, were not included in our analysis.

Our sample consisted of 16 family units. The relationship between victim and offender varied depending upon the makeup of the family. The victims were parents and siblings (31.25 %,  $n = 5$  families); parents and other family members such as grandparents, uncles, or cousins (12.5 %,  $n = 2$  families); mother, mother's partner, and the offender's child (6.25 %,  $n = 1$  family); only children (6.25 %,  $n = 1$  family); and only parents if no siblings were in the family (43.75 %,  $n = 7$  families).

### Offenders and Victims' Characteristics

**Offenders** The 19 offenders in our sample were mostly Caucasian (78.95 %,  $n = 15$ ) males (84.21 %,  $n = 16$ ) whose mean age was 18 years (range 14–21 years,  $SD = 2.04$ ). Of the offenders, 21.05 % were enrolled in a school ( $n = 4$ ), another 21.05 % were enrolled in a school and had a job ( $n = 4$ ), 26.32 % had a job ( $n = 5$ ), and 15.79 % were not enrolled in a school nor had a job ( $n = 3$ ). In three cases (15.79 %), school status or employment status was unknown. Forty percent of the offenders were involved in an intimate relationship with a same age peer (42.11 %,  $n = 8$ ). Forty percent of the offenders had a history of aggressive behavior towards their families (42.11 %,  $n = 8$ ) but had rarely been convicted of nonfamilial violent crimes. Less often, offenders alleged that they were victims of parental physical or sexual violence (21.05 %,  $n = 4$ ). Two siblings alleged being repeatedly physically abused by their father and teamed up to kill their parents. One offender alleged that her mother's partner took sexual advantage of her and decided to recruit her sister in order to attack her mother, her mother's partner, and her own baby. A fourth offender made vague allegations of abuse but did not specify the identity of his abuser. He reportedly refused to

disclose more about the abuse due to his family's lack of support. Specifically, this offender resented that his family allegedly verbally abused him after the allegations; he killed his entire family.

Almost half the offenders (47.37 %,  $n = 9$ ) had a long history of abusing one or more drugs including marijuana (31.58 %,  $n = 6$ ), cocaine (26.32 %,  $n = 5$ ), crystal meth (10.53 %,  $n = 2$ ), LSD (10.53 %,  $n = 2$ ), and alcohol (5.26 %,  $n = 1$ ). Only two offenders had a reported history of mental illness (10.53 %) such as depression (5.26 %,  $n = 1$ ), or schizophrenia (5.26 %,  $n = 1$ ), even though several offenders were referred for psychological treatment for behavioral problems before the murders (21.05 %,  $n = 4$ ), but only one (5.26 %) of these four offenders actually attended therapy.

A majority of the offenders (89.47 %,  $n = 17$ ) were living with their families and had a conflictive relationship with them. When interviewed after the murders, a total of seven offenders (41.18 %) reported a perception of being abused by their parents or their parents' partners. Only four of these offenders had a prior history of an allegation of abuse. Their main conflicts centered on one of following topics: parental control of an offender's activities or friends (23.53 %,  $n = 4$ ), an offender's substance abuse (17.65 %,  $n = 3$ ), an offender's dislike of the partner of one the parents (e.g., alleged abuse and repeated arguments) (17.65 %,  $n = 3$ ), allegations of physical abuse (10.53 %,  $n = 2$ ), a perception of family emotional abuse (10.53 %,  $n = 2$ ), an offender's report of being sexually abused by a neighbor and the family suggesting the offender was homosexual (5.88 %,  $n = 1$ ), an offender's bad grades (5.88 %,  $n = 1$ ), or an offender's break up with an intimate partner (5.88 %,  $n = 1$ ). All of the family members with a contentious relationship with the offender were attacked, except in two cases. In one case, the offender had a conflict with his mother's new partner and was sent to live with his father. This offender killed his father and his father's family. In the second case, the offender broke up with her partner and decided to kill their children.

**Victims** A total of 42 victims were specifically targeted, according to all available information. Thirty-seven victims (88.1 %) were killed at the crime scene, two victims (4.76 %) survived the assault, and the remaining three victims (7.14 %) were intended to be killed but these offenders were deterred before they were attacked. The latter occurred in two cases where the offenders attacked the victims as soon as they arrived home and were arrested before they could attack their other targets.

The victims were mostly Caucasian (71.43 %,  $n = 30$ ) and less often African American (23.81 %,  $n = 10$ ). In two cases (4.76 %), the ethnicity of the victim was unknown. The victims had an average age of 36 years ( $M = 36.16$ ,  $SD = 17.75$ ) and were almost evenly distributed between males (45.24 %,  $n = 19$ ) and females (54.76 %,  $n = 23$ ).

Approximately half the victims had reported to third parties that they were concerned about the offenders' disturbed behavior (47.62 %,  $n = 20$ ), but only one victim expressed prior specific concern for personal safety. The victims' stated concerns about offenders' behavior were focused on stealing from home (14.29 %,  $n = 6$ ), sexual, physical, or verbal aggressive behavior (14.29 %,  $n = 6$ ), depression and suicidality (4.76 %,  $n = 2$ ), non-compliance with rules (4.76 %,  $n = 2$ ), disturbed behavior at home, which led to offenders being forbidden from living at home (4.76 %,  $n = 2$ ), delusional ideation (2.38 %,  $n = 1$ ), and substance abuse (2.38 %,  $n = 1$ ).

### Pre-Offense Behavior (16 Familicides)

Within the year prior to the murders, in all 16 incidents there was evidence of an escalation of the future offenders' clinical condition or behavior. In about half the cases, there was aggravation of a clinical condition such as a significant increase in substance abuse (37.5 %,  $n = 6$ ), or symptoms of a significant psychological disorder (12.5 %,  $n = 2$ ). In half of the cases (50 %,  $n = 8$ ), offenders' behavioral problems in their homes increased (e.g., offenders stole from their parents or ran away from home). In three (18.75 %) of the four cases in which offenders alleged being physically and sexually victimized by their families, the allegations persisted and were shared with third parties. In half the cases (50 %,  $n = 8$ ), the offenders leaked their homicidal intentions to third parties and four cases (25 %) included a behavioral rehearsal (i.e., physically attacked or prepared to attack other individuals).

### Crime Scene Behaviors (16 Familicides)

All of the 42 familicide victims were attacked in their homes. Most of the murders (68.75 %,  $n = 11$ ) were committed in a single-event that took a few minutes. In four cases (25 %), the murder was carried out in two different time periods, approximately 30 min to four hours apart.

Offenders started the attack when they were already at home (87.5 %,  $n = 14$ ) or as soon as the victims granted them access to the house (12.5 %,  $n = 2$ ). The familicides were mostly committed with weapons (93.75 %,  $n = 15$ ) that were either available at home (81.25 %,  $n = 13$ ) or were bought and/or borrowed from someone else (12.5 %,  $n = 2$ ). In half the cases, the murders were committed with a single weapon (50 %,  $n = 8$ ) and a single-killing method (75 %,  $n = 12$ ), with the most common method being shooting (75 %,  $n = 12$ ). The victims were killed more often in different rooms of their house, mostly the living room (50 %,  $n = 8$ ) or bedroom (37.5 %,  $n = 6$ ). In two cases (12.5 %), the victims were not killed in the house or the location of the murders could not be determined due to offenders' staging the crime scene. Table 1 details specific offense behavior.



**Table 1** Crime scene behaviors  
(*n* = 16 cases)

Crime Scene behaviors	<i>n</i>	%
Number of weapons		
0	1	6.25
1	8	50
2	5	31.25
3	2	12.5
One killing method for all victims	12	75
Multiple killing methods	4	25
Killing methods		
Shooting	12	75
Bludgeoning	3	18.75
Stabbing	2	12.5
Asphyxiation	2	12.5
Attacks started when offenders were already at home	14	87.5
Attacks started as soon as victims granted offenders access to home	2	12.5
Attack took place in different rooms in the house	8	50
Attack took place in the same room of the house	6	37.5
Rooms where attack took place		
Living room	8	50
Bedroom	6	37.5
Hallway	2	12.5
Kitchen	2	12.5
Stairs	2	12.5
Entrance	2	12.5
Garage	1	6.25

### Offender-Victim Interaction at Time of Homicide (42 Victims' Actions)

The majority of the 42 victims were attacked without provocation (61.91 %, *n* = 26), or as a consequence of an escalated argument (19.05 %, *n* = 8). In some of the cases (19.05 %, *n* = 7), victims' actions during the murders could not be determined. In the 26 cases (61.91 %) where the victims were attacked without prior provocation, some victims were killed when resting or sleeping (28.57 %, *n* = 12), when entering the home (19.05 %, *n* = 8), when watching TV (9.52 %, *n* = 4), and when doing house chores (4.76 %, *n* = 2). In the eight cases (19.05 %) where the victims were attacked during escalated arguments, three victims were arguing with the offender (7.14 %), three were fleeing the scene (7.14 %), one was checking up on the gunshots already fired (2.38 %), and one was calling the police (2.38 %).

### Offenders' Post-Offense Behavior (16 Familicides)

In the majority of the 16 familicides (75 %, *n* = 12), victims' money or credit cards were stolen, and/or offenders' called their friends or visited them (50 %, *n* = 8) to explain the murders (25 %, *n* = 4), or to plan subsequent leisure activities

for the day (25 %, *n* = 4). The murders were reported to law enforcement mostly by individuals who had regular contact with the victims, such as relatives (37.5 %, *n* = 6), friends (18.75 %, *n* = 3), or co-workers (12.5 %, *n* = 2). In three cases (18.75 %) the offender notified the authorities. In one case (6.25 %), a surviving victim called the police, and in another case (6.25 %), a stranger called law enforcement. In 13 cases (81.25 %), the offenders confessed to the murders. A total of 11 offenders (68.75 %) reported the main reasons for their crimes to law enforcement. In eight cases (50 %), the offenders persisted in their allegations of resentment towards parental control and/or abuse. In two cases (12.5 %), offenders alleged that their attacks were driven by paranoid ideation of being attacked. A last offender (6.25 %) noted that he wanted to escape from family discord. See Table 2 for details about post-offense behavior and stated motives for the murders.

### Discussion

This descriptive study on youthful familicidal offenders aims at expanding on prior research and case analyses. The results of our study are consistent with findings of prior research (Ewing 1997; Heide and McCurdy 2010;

**Table 2** Offenders' postoffense behavior and stated motives for the familicides (n = 16 cases)

Postoffense behavior and stated motivation	n	%
Stole victims' money or credit cards	12	75
Called or visited their friends	8	50
Left crime scene immediately	13	81.25
Committed suicide	1	6.25
Called police	1	6.25
Engaged in necrophilia	2	12.5
Returned to crime scene to visit the bodies	1	6.25
Staging	12	75
Physically altering crime scene	3	18.75
Giving false information to law enforcement	4	25
Both	5	31.25
Offenders' confession	13	81.25
Immediate	4	25
After being repeatedly interrogated about crime scene evidence	9	56.25
Reasons for the murders reported to law enforcement	11	68.75
Allegedly being emotionally and/or physically abused	5	31.25
Resentment of parental control	3	18.75
Delusional ideation of being poisoned or threatened	2	12.5
Desires to run away from home	1	6.25

Shon and Roberts 2010, Malmquist 1980; Meloy et al. 2001; Mulvey et al. 2006) in that the vast majority of youthful familicidal offenders were Caucasian males who had long-term conflicts with their families. These conflicts centered on aggressive behavior, stealing, non-compliance with rules, poor grades, substance abuse, and relationship difficulties with parents' partners. However, our findings do not support many prior findings that most familicides resulted primarily from arguments that quickly and spontaneously escalated into homicide (see youthful cluster description in Liem and Reichelmann 2014). These studies appear to suggest that the attacks had an abrupt onset as a result of a lack of planning and/or impulsivity. Even if familicides had an abrupt onset, all familicides in our sample involved individuals who had endorsed homicidal ideation for some time and had planned or rehearsed how to carry the murders.

All familicides we studied were acts of targeted violence—planned attacks directed at specific victims (Fein et al. 1995). The offenders displayed some general risk factors for violence (e.g., prior criminal convictions, substance abuse, or mental health disorders) that are often captured by standardized risk assessment measures (see Douglas et al. 2013). And, in several instances, some of these general risk factors increased just prior to the homicides (Calhoun and Weston 2003; Borum et al. 1999).

In addition to these general risk factors, Meloy et al. (2012) and Schlesinger (2000) discussed a more specific (and often poorly understood) risk factor—the development of a fixed belief that violence is the future offenders' only option.

These authors found that some acts of targeted violence, such as familicide, are often preceded by the individual feeling compelled to commit the aggressive act. At least half of the offenders in this study verbalized homicidal ideation prior to and after the murders. Eleven offenders informed law enforcement that homicide was an acceptable solution to end chronic family discord. This violent ideation was often accompanied by offenders' polarized (or split) view of the future victims in that their families were seen as all bad, while they viewed themselves as all good (see Liem and Reichelmann 2014; Meloy 1992; Schlesinger 1996). Shortly before the murders, offenders who targeted their families often leaked their intentions, recruited helpers, looked for weaponry, and rehearsed violent behavior towards non-family members such as people at their school. These factors have been considered suggestive of imminent violence in prior studies (Meloy et al. 2012). Accordingly, the risk for youth familicide is hypothesized to increase as offenders' behavior progresses from presenting with general risk factors for violence, to displaying behaviors that are indicative of imminent violence, as well as their developing a fixed idea that homicide is the solution to their problem.

The actual assault itself often occurred when the victims entered their home or when they were resting or sleeping. Both the lethality of the gunshots and the unforeseen onset of the attack considerably hindered victims' ability to survive. After the murders, many of the offenders studied tried to cover up the murders, or stage the crime scene by altering physical evidence or reporting false and misleading information to law

enforcement (or both). And when they were arrested, offenders were reticent to confess to the murders in the initial moments of the investigation. Many of these offenders were reported to have displayed an overt appearance of normality and remorse was rarely observed. Some of the offenders were found to be in possession of the victims' belongings and/or shared incriminatory information about their behavior and thoughts with their friends.

Familicides and other types of mass murder are often impossible to predict because of their extreme rarity (Borum et al. 1999). Additionally, familicidal offenders rarely displayed distinct risk factors that would differentiate them from other violent offenders. Therefore, an attempt to identify which youth is going to engage in mass murder would lead to many false-positive cases – that is, individuals who display similar risk factors but do not kill others. Despite the lack of specific risk factors for familicide, the offenders presented with a discernible pattern of behavioral escalation from homicidal ideation, to a pre-attack plan, to eventually engaging in physical violence. Therefore, intervention with youth that can potentially resort to familicide should start with a clear focus of exploring these dynamic behavioral indicators (see Fein et al. 2002; Meloy et al. 2012). Specifically, youths who present general risk factors for violence and engage in pre-attack behaviors (e.g., leakage of homicidal intent, acquisition of weapons, practice with a weapon connected to homicidal ideation, and attempts to recruit help in order to attack the targets) must be effectively neutralized. Accordingly, mental health professionals' direct and careful questioning of a potential familicide offender regarding the presence of homicidal ideation – particularly a fixed belief that violence is the only solution to their problem – is a necessity. In addition, any attempt to acquire weapons or approach the targets should be prevented in cases where youth have specific homicidal plans and means (e.g., weapons). Lastly, mental health professionals, clergy, family physicians, law enforcement officers, and others who might come in contact with a future offender need to assess the potential for homicide and cooperate in reporting the youths' homicidal plans so that different types of interventions can be rapidly implemented.

Some of the weaknesses of the present study warrant discussion. While this study utilized a larger group of youthful offenders than prior research, the sample is still relatively small, is not necessarily representative, and therefore not always generalizable to other samples. In addition, heterogeneous dynamics were found in which perpetrators either killed their parents or their children. In two dynamics, the power balance between victims and offenders is reversed, which might skew the sample results. Despite these limitations, the present study is among the first to implement a comprehensive approach to analyze the characteristics of youthful offenders who killed their families. Also the present study is among the first to conceptualize familicide as a form of targeted violence

(see Meloy et al. 2012) and offers a preliminary suggestion for early intervention in these cases.

Future research might benefit from continuing to analyze familicide as a form of targeted violence and compare this dynamic to other forms of targeted violence. Such as, comparing multiple-victim homicides involving family and non-family members. Future research might also compare offenders with different power balances with family members, including offenders who killed their spouse and children versus those who killed their parents and siblings. Next, this exploratory study centers on providing a holistic overview of youthful familicidal offenders. Future research might explore only the offenders' pre-offense behavior in order to assess whether targeted violence assessment measures, such as the RAGE-V (Association of Threat Assessment Professionals 2006), the Cawood Assessment and Response Grids (Cawood and Corcoran 2009), or the WAVR-21 (White and Meloy 2010), offer adequate tools for clinicians dealing with youth at risk for familicide. Lastly, the results of this study showed that a majority of the offenders used a gun in order to carry out the murders. Guns were convenient and available weapons. However, whether availability of firearms facilitates or hinders an attack is beyond the scope of the present study and future studies may investigate this phenomenon. Nonetheless, the planning of the murders did not center on the selection of the weapon, and rather was based on choosing a specific moment, requesting help, or learning how to carry out an attack. Further studies examining the development of gun violence policies and their impact on this type of murder are needed to clarify this important point.

**Acknowledgments** The authors would like to express their gratitude to the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit for coordinating access to the data used in this paper. Authors' opinion, statements and conclusions should not be considered an endorsement by the FBI for any policy, program or service.

## References

- Anderson, A., Sisask, M., & Värnik, A. (2011). Familicide and suicide in a case of gambling dependence. *Journal Of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 22(1), 156–168. doi:10.1080/14789949.2010.518244.
- Anthony, B. (2014). *An exploratory multiple case study of core themes associated with parricide* (Order No. 3564359). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (ATT 1415407396). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1415407396?accountid=11724>.
- Association of Threat Assessment Professionals. (2006). *Risk assessment guideline elements for violence: Considerations for assessing the risk of future violent behavior*. Retrieved May 23, 2016, from <http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.atapworldwide.org/resource/resmgr/imported/documents/RAGE-V.pdf>.
- Borum, R., Fein, R., Vossekuil, B., & Berglund, J. (1999). Threat assessment: Defining an approach for evaluating risk of targeted violence. *Behavioral Sciences & The Law*, 17(3), 323–337. doi:10.1002/(SICI)1099-0798(199907/09)17:3<323::AID-BSL349>3.0.CO;2-G.



- Calhoun, F. S., & Weston, S. W. (2003). *Contemporary threat management: A guide for identifying, assessing, and managing individuals of violent intent*. San Diego: Specialized Training Services.
- Cawood, J. S., & Corcoran, M. H. (2009). *Violence assessment and intervention: The practitioner's handbook* (2nd ed.). Boca Raton: CRC Press.
- Dietz, P. E. (1986). Mass, serial and sensational homicides. *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine*, 62(5), 477–491. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1629267/pdf/bullnyacadmed00051-0111.pdf>.
- Douglas, K. S., Hart, S. D., Webster, C. D., & Belfrage, H. (2013). HCR-20 V3: Assessing risk for violence – User guide. Burnaby, Canada: Mental Health, Law, and Policy Institute, Simon Fraser University.
- Duwe, G. (2004). The patterns and prevalence of mass murder in the twentieth century in America. *Justice Quarterly*, 21(4), 729–761. doi:10.1080/07418820400095971.
- Ewing, C. (1997). *Fatal families: The dynamics of intrafamilial homicide*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Fegadel, A. R., & Heide, M. (2015). Offspring-perpetrated familicide: Examining family homicides involving parents as victims. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*. Advanced Online publication. doi:10.1177/0306624X15589091.
- Fein, R. A., Vossekuil, B., & Holden, G. A. (1995). Threat assessment: An approach to prevent targeted violence. *National Institute of Justice Research in Action*, 1–7.
- Fein, R. A., Vossekuil, B., Pollack, W. S., Borum, R., Modzeleski, W., & Reddy, M. (2002). Threat assessment in schools: A guide to managing threatening situations and to creating safe school climates. Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service & U.S. Department of Education.
- Heide, K. M. (2013). *Understanding parricide: When sons and daughters kill parents*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Heide, K. M., & McCurdy, J. (2010). Juvenile parricide offenders sentenced to death. *Victims & Offenders*, 5(1), 76–99. doi:10.1080/15564880903048545.
- Holmes, R. M., & Holmes, S. T. (1992). Understanding mass murder: A starting point. *Federal Probation*, 56(1), 53–61 (Accession No. 1992-35495-001).
- Léveillé, S. S., Lefebvre, J. J., & Marleau, J. D. (2009). Profil psychosocial des famillicides commis au Québec—1986 à 2000 [Familicide in Quebec—1986 to 2000]. *Annales Médico-Psychologiques*, 167(8), 591–596. doi:10.1016/j.amp.2007.05.021.
- Léveillé, S., Marleau, J., & Lefebvre, J. (2010). Passage à l'acte famillicide et filicide: Deux réalités distinctes? [Familicide and filicide: There are two distinct realities?]. *L'évolution Psychiatrique*, 75(1), 19–33. doi:10.1016/j.evopsy.2007.06.005.
- Liem, M., & Reichelmann, A. (2014). Patterns of multiple family homicide. *Homicide Studies: An Interdisciplinary & International Journal*, 18(1), 44–58. doi:10.1177/1088767913511460.
- Liem, M., Levin, J., Holland, C., & Fox, J. A. (2013). The nature and prevalence of familicide in the United States, 2000–2009. *Journal of Family Violence*, 28(4), 351–358. doi:10.1007/s10896-013-9504-2.
- Malmquist, C. P. (1980). Psychiatric aspects of familicide. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law Online*, 8(3), 298–304. Retrieved from <http://www.jaapl.org/content/8/3/298.full.pdf+html>.
- Marleau, J. D., Auclair, N., & Millaud, F. (2006). Comparison of factors associated with parricide in adults and adolescents. *Journal of Family Violence*, 21(5), 321–325. doi:10.1007/s10896-006-9029-z.
- Marty, F. (2010). Le parricide de Pierre Rivière comme échec du processus d'Adolescence [The parricide perpetrated by Pierre Rivière as an example of the failure of the adolescent process]. *L'évolution psychiatrique*, 75(1), 153–164. doi:10.1016/j.evopsy.2009.12.014.
- Meloy, J. (1992). *Violent attachments*. Lanham: Jason Aronson.
- Meloy, J., Hempel, A. G., Mohandie, K., Shiva, A. A., & Gray, B. (2001). Offender and offense characteristics of a nonrandom sample of adolescent mass murderers. *Journal of The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 40(6), 719–728. doi:10.1097/00004583-200106000-00018.
- Meloy, J., Hoffmann, J., Guldinann, A., & James, D. (2012). The role of warning behaviors in threat assessment: An exploration and suggested typology. *Behavioral Sciences & The Law*, 30(3), 256–279. doi:10.1002/bsl.999.
- Messing, J. T., & Heeren, J. W. (2004). Another side of multiple murder: women killers in domestic context. *Homicide Studies*, 8(2), 123–158. doi:10.1177/1088767903262446.
- Mulvey, A., Fournier, A., & Donahue, T. (2006). Murder in the Family: The Menendez Brothers. *Victims & Offenders*, 1(3), 213–224. doi:10.1080/15564880600843677.
- Scheinin, L., Rogers, C., & Sathyavagiswaran, L. (2011). Familicide-Suicide: A cluster of 3 cases in Los Angeles County. *American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology*, 32(4), 327–330. doi:10.1097/PAF.0b013e31821a555a.
- Schlesinger, L. B. (1996). The catathymic process: Psychopathology and psychodynamics of extreme aggression. In L. B. Schlesinger (Ed.) *Explorations in criminal psychopathology*, (pp. 121–141). Springfield, Thomas.
- Schlesinger, L. B. (2000). Familicide, depression and catathymic process. *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 45, 200–203.
- Schlesinger, L. B., Gardenier, A., Jarvis, J., & Sheehan-Cook, J. (2014). Crime scene staging in homicide. *Journal of Police And Criminal Psychology*, 29(1), 44–51. doi:10.1007/s11896-012-9114-6.
- Scott, H., & Fleming, K. (2014). The female family annihilator: An exploratory study. *Homicide Studies: An Interdisciplinary & International Journal*, 18(1), 59–82. doi:10.1177/1088767913513152.
- Shon, P. C., & Roberts, M. A. (2008). Post-offence characteristics of 19th-century American parricides: An archival exploration. *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling*, 5(3), 147–169. doi:10.1002/jip.85.
- Shon, P., & Roberts, M. A. (2010). An archival exploration of homicide—Suicide and mass murder in the context of 19th-century American parricides. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 54(1), 43–60. doi:10.1177/0306624X08324472.
- Sisask, M., Mark, L., & Värnik, A. (2012). Internet comments elicited by media portrayal of a familicide-suicide case. *Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention*, 33(4), 222–229. doi:10.1027/0227-5910/a000134.
- Stone, A. A. (1993). Murder with no apparent motive. *Journal of Psychiatry & Law*, 21(2), 175–189 (Accession No. 1994-37804-001).
- Thaller, J. (2012). The children are listening: An autoethnographic account of the years leading up to familicide in a quiet, suburban neighborhood. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 18(3), 266–272. Retrieved from [http://www.academia.edu/1555347/The\\_Children\\_Are\\_Listening](http://www.academia.edu/1555347/The_Children_Are_Listening).
- Websdale, N. (2010). *Familicidal hearts: The emotional styles of 211 killers*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- White, S. G., & Meloy, J. R. (2010). WAVR-21. A structured guide for the assessment of workplace and campus violence risk. San Diego: Specialized Training Services.
- Wilson, M., Daly, M., & Daniele, A. (1995). Familicide: The killing of spouse and children. *Aggressive Behavior*, 21(4), 275–291. doi:10.1002/1098-2337(1995)21:4<275::AID-AB2480210404>3.0.CO;2-S.